

Freeing of his Slaves

On August 8, 1863, Andrew Johnson, then-military governor of Tennessee, freed his personal slaves.

Johnson’s wife Eliza reported the news. “One day Mrs. Johnson called us all in and said we were free now,” William recalled. “She said we were free to go or we could stay if we wanted to. We all stayed.”

Emancipating Tennessee Slaves

On October 24, 1864, a little more than a year after he had freed his own slaves, Johnson proclaimed freedom for all Tennessee slaves.

“I, Andrew Johnson, do hereby proclaim freedom, full broad, and unconditional, to every man in Tennessee. I invoke the colored people to be orderly and law-abiding, but at the same time let them assert their rights, and if traitors and ruffians attack them, while in the discharge of their duties, let them defend themselves as all men have a right to do.”

On February 25, 1865 the African-Americans of Nashville presented him with a gold watch in recognition of his “untiring energy in the cause of freedom.”

Later that same day, he issued a proclamation certifying the ratification of the state constitution to end slavery in Tennessee forever.

The 8th of August Celebration

Today, the 8th of August is not only commemorated in Greeneville, but in other communities throughout the region. As early as the 1920s there were great celebrations in Knoxville at Chilhowee Park involving thousands of participants. This was the only day of the year that the park was open to African-Americans.

In past celebrations great excursions took place. An August 9, 1888 Knoxville, Tennessee newspaper article mentions, “Some 200 Negroes returning at East Tennessee Depot from an excursion to Greeneville.”

Another newspaper in 1871 tells how “the colored people of Greeneville had a celebration at that place yesterday ... they were addressed by ex-President Johnson ... President Johnson went out about 11 o’clock in a two-

horse buggy in company with several other gentlemen. The procession commenced moving ... to Tusculum College, near which the speaking and picnic exercises were held.”

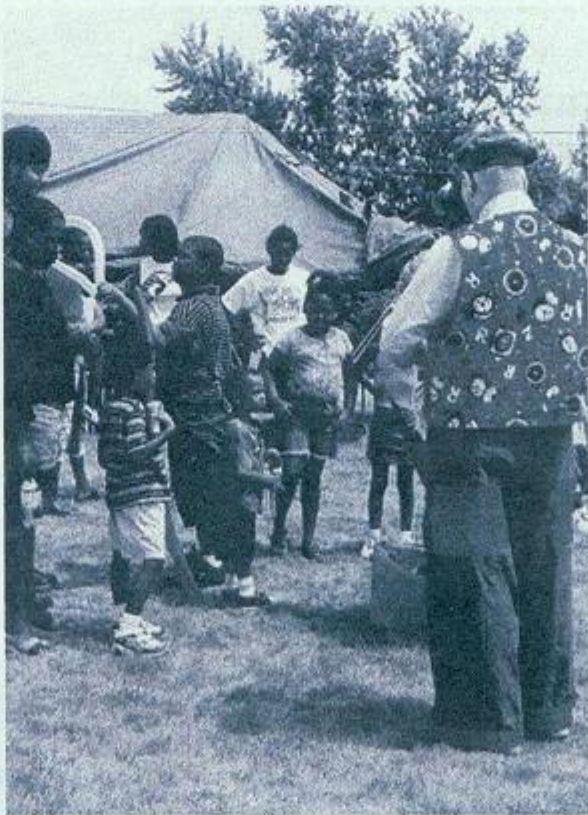
Since those days, the celebrations have continued. Recent festivities held in Greeneville have included picnics, concerts, card game tournaments and dancing.

Sometimes it is a two-day event, with a dance being held the Friday night closest to the 8th and the rest of the activities taking place the next day.

However it is chosen to be celebrated, August 8th is a very important day in the region’s history.



Photographs of the 1986 “8th of August Celebration” in Greeneville, Tennessee



Photographs of the 2002 “8th of August Celebration” in Greeneville, Tennessee